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ABSTRACT

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at Guilford College, North Carolina, has actively sought troubleshooting tips to pass on to new and continuing teachers of "W" (writing intensive) courses. Tips (problem statements and solutions) are based on the analysis of six semesters' worth of students "W" course evaluations and instructor narratives (collected as part of the regular term-end assessment from approximately 1,800 students and the instructors of 90 courses). The problems and solutions can be organized into four main categories that reflect the main "W" features: (1) a process approach to writing; (2) the use of informal writing as a pedagogical tool; (3) a writing text to support the "W" component; and (4) peer editing. Problems based on integrating the writing process include: over-emphasizing/underemphasizing the writing process; inadequate orientation to the "W" course; and the need for more effective sequencing of assigned work. Problems involving informal writing include: the informal writing is not informal enough; lack of motivation; too much informal writing is required; and the informal writing is not integrated into the course. One of the problems with the writing text is that the text is inappropriate for the course. Problems with peer editing include: student editors do not provide quality feedback; and the instructor is insufficiently involved in the peer evaluation process. The "W" instructor who learns through balance and integration to cope with these problems has become a better teacher in the process. (RS)

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Jeff Jeske

Troubleshooting the "W" Course

ED 362 871

Teaching a "W" (or "writing intensive") course presents an unusually difficult pedagogical challenge. From the outset, for example, the "W" instructor is faced with the task of fusing what must often seem two disparate and even mutually opposed courses: the busy and typically product-oriented base course and the process-oriented, time-intensive writing component.

Worse yet, successful integration requires a set of writing-component moves which usually take someone who specializes in writing instruction years to perfect. For instance, how long does it take an English instructor new to the writing class to learn how to create a pedagogically sound sequence of paper assignments, one which effectively correlates paper types with the writing process's sub-tasks as these are sequentially taken up and interlinked? How long to get peer editing to work right? to integrate journals and other types of informal writing in ways that support the course without raising student hackles? And yet we customarily ask "W" instructors to hit the proverbial home run the first time out, even while they may be feeling extremely tentative about what they are undertaking. This is a recipe for trouble. Not only individual courses but an entire WAC program can be jeapordized when new "W" instructors -- who often gauge their commitment to the WAC program on the basis of their first "W" course experiences -- inevitably run into problems and resulting low morale.

Clearly, adequate training and ongoing support are crucial. Steps which can be taken include:

-- workshops on specific elements of "W" pedagogy

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

-- a how-to teaching manual

-- regular shop-talk lunches throughout the year to discuss problems as they come up

-- a term-end assessment of each "W" course consisting of evaluation forms filled out by students and narratives written by participating faculty. Both can then be closely analyzed and the results presented to "W" instructors and incorporated as troubleshooting apparatus in the following year's revision of the how-to-manual (the results can also appear on shop-talk lunch agendas).

At Guilford College, which includes these steps as part of its WAC program, we have actively sought troubleshooting tips to pass on to new and continuing "W" faculty. Those which this article presents have proven to be the most important. They represent the results of analysis of six semesters' worth of student "W" course evaluations and instructor narratives (collected from approximately 1,800 students and the instructors of 90 courses ranging from accounting to religion, from chemistry to theater studies). The tips are organized in four main categories reflecting the main "W" features which instructors pledge by written contract to include in their courses: (1) a process approach to writing, culminating in a minimum of 15 pages of polished final prose, (2) the use of informal writing as a pedagogical tool, (3) a writing text to support the "W" component, and (4) peer editing.

I. Integrating the Writing Process

Problem #1: Over-emphasizing the writing process/ not emphasizing the writing process enough.

The instructors who are most enthusiastic about adding a writing component to an established course are likely to overemphasize writing initially. The result, as one student put it:

> The writing component of this course took so much time away from the course itself that I didn't learn that much about labor economics. The writing part was overdone, we spent too much time writing, editing, and turning in drafts -- sometimes these drafts were due just days apart.

A student in another class put it more succinctly: "I did not come into this class to become a blooming novelist -- I came in here to learn some chemistry."

Instructors who are more tentative about the "W" predictably experience an opposite problem: not emphasizing the writing process enough. Their students will generate term-end evaluation comments like this one from a Buddhism course: "It just didn't seem measurably different from any other course I've taken . . . I don't think this course lived up to whatever the aims & objectives of 'W'courses are supposed to be." A student taking an interdisciplinary "Cross-Cultural Aging" notes that "no emphasis was put on [writing] except grading. No suggestions were given for improving, just 'see the handbook.'"

Solution: Going to either extreme will produce discouraging negative results

and feedback. The goal, then, is balance. Most necessary adjustments are rooted in the logic of syllabus and course calendar and these can usually be worked out in consultation with the WAC director. The most important balancing strategy, though, involves integration. New "W" instructors often express their tentativeness by creating what are essentially separate, parallel courses: one disciplinary, the other a weak version of an English course. Students in disciplinary courses tend to resent the latter no matter how strongly or weakly emphasized, writing comments like "I think English should cover English and economics should cover economics." A student in an honors "Age of Shogun" course adds,

> It is unadvisable to charge people who are not writers/teachers of writing with the task of teaching writing skills. I wanted [the instructors] to teach religion and history, not English (as if they are capable of teaching English).

Another student in the "Age of Shogun" course writes, "It seems that the writing was done for its own sake rather than as a help to the whole course." If the writing done does not serve the course it will indeed seem like an intruder, reinforcing the outmoded concept that writing is something separate that happens after the real work of thinking has taken place.

Two of the "strongest early WAC supporters" referred to above were economists. Both received negative feedback after their first semester, but each reacted differently. The first retailored his course so that writing became a dynamic tool of learning economics, both in informal assignments and in a multi-stage research paper. He stopped trying to be an English department

surrogate and intead modeled his own writing practices as an economist. This instructor's evaluations are now among the best in the program. The second instructor acknowledged in her narrative, "I have trouble enabling students to see that learning how to write is learning economics." At first she continued to offer "W" courses but after still receiving feedback indicating that her students were (correctly and unhappily) interpreting the "W" designation as meaning writing in addition to economics, she dropped out of the WAC program. She intends to continue using the same writing activities, hoping that the removal of the official "W" designation will enable students to look at writing differently -- as integral to the practice of economics.

Note: Getting the right relationship between base course and writing component almost inevitably takes more than one term. Revision will be necessary -- and the need for it does not signal failure.

Problem #2: Inadequate orientation to the "W" course.

A student in a "History of Modern Japan" course writes: "Maybe if we talked more about the advantages, usefulnesses of it, it would have helped. Maybe if we valued it as beneficial it would have been more beneficial."

Solution: It is crucial to take time at the front end of a course to explain clearly what the "W" course is, not to mention its "advantages" and "usefulnesses." If a goal of writing instruction per se is to have students cultivate a meta-awareness of themselves as writers and learners, how much more important it is to do so in a "W" course, where the moves are more complicated and advanced than they are in first-year English.

An instructor can profitably link the "W" course with the students' past writing experiences. An advanced psychology student notes, "I have not had writing courses since my freshman year, so my writing was rusty to begin with." Probably, this student's meta-awareness of self-as-writer and ability to engage in discourse about writing are also rusty. These can be worked on in journal writing and class discussion.

Other categories of orientation: the features which individualize the discipline's discourse, the role of the course in the department's spectrum of courses (some students fear that other professors in the department have different expectations and that the "W" course may actually handicap them), the tasks to be performed in the course. The often-expressed concern that "I felt like I was never certain about what was expected" suggests that while some ultimate virtue may reside in an instructor's playing the part of Zen roshi, presenting assignments as if they were koans, the practice works against the success of a "W" course.

The same orienting procedures that work in a standard writing course apply here. Some of these -- besides ongoing straight talk about the course as "W" -- are (1) clear articulation of the characteristics of excellent writing in the discipline, (2) the display of these standards via excellent examples, whether professional- or student-generated, (3) clear prompts, and (4) well-defined grading criteria

Problem #3: Need for more effective sequencing of assigned work.

When a "W" course works well, students comment that the attention to process brings them a long way in their writing. Drafting, as one student in a "Renaissance and Reformation" course notes, "helped me to produce one of my best pieces yet." Another observes, "At first I didn't like the idea of the first draft being mandatory, but now I realize how important it is to write my ideas out at least once before the final draft."

Care must be taken, though, to structure writing assignments in a sequence that facilitates such benefits as (1) heightened awareness of revision's value and (2) proficiency at specific revising activities. Often, this important planning aspect gets lost in the welter of preparation for a new "W" course.

Solution: If there are multiple papers, the instructor should arrange them to build on each other in complexity; later assignments should exercise skills learned in earlier ones. Commenting on an early American literature "W," a student observes,

> The method used was a bit too much like [Benjamin] Franklin's plan [for moral perfection]. We worked on a couple of things with each paper, the way he worked on one virtue a week, but we would lose what we did on the last paper. It would help if there was more of a building process.

An equally important element in sequencing is time: time for students to complete their tasks and for the "building" aspects of an effectively designed assignment ladder to take. Whereas a semester's evaluations always feature representative comments like "the greatest strength of the writing component in this course was the fact that there was so much writing involved that I got

better" and "constant writing helped me to pick up on my mistakes and an opportunity to work on them," students in some courses will respond like this "Psychology of Personality" student:

> The sheer number of papers, interviews, journal entries, field work, was insanely overwhelming. Coupled with other courses that all demanded writing I feel as though any benefits I could have gotten from writing were nullified.

The course instructor had assigned ten papers and required students to peer-edit the entire class's drafts.

Students across disciplines indicate clearly that the more time allowed to peer-edit and revise a paper, the better: for example, three days to peer edit a group's papers (and longer, depending on the paper's size), a week to revise their own drafts once peer-edited drafts have been returned. Students also emphasize that papers required to be written and/or heavily revised during the semester's last week are bad news: the general crunch of assignments works against a good learning experience, especially if the paper is large.

Regarding number and size of papers generally: students tend to call for fewer, smaller, more diverse assignments. If the same mode (e.g., summary) <u>is</u> to be used repeatedly, students suggest that its format be varied. The general run of comments also suggests that professors should be sure to tailor paper lengths to the objectives of assignment and course. For example, a "Buddhism" student suggests that the course professor "make the paper length either longer or shorter than 6-7 pages -- that was too long to focus narrowly and too

short to expand, given the assignment." Another student in the same course comments, "I find a lot of value in short, concise papers as they are sometimes more useful in the 'real world'." These students may be on to something.

Many professors assign one large research paper instead of a series of shorter papers, dividing the writing of it into stages with separate peer-editing activity and due dates. Students generally respond well to this practice as long as it is spread out so as to avoid second-half-of-the-semester overload. The same structuring principle applies: quality should take precedence over quantity.

Finally, an economics student adds, "If a 'W' course is going to have more writing than other classes, it would be nice if the exams were less stringent so as to give one more time and energy for the writing."

II. Informal Writing

Problem #1: The informal writing is not informal enough.

Informal writing assignments have the proven potential to stimulate invention and enable students to experience writing as a mode of learning. Sometimes, as one student in a "Humanistic Ecology" course observed, they offer an approach to topics which initially seem too difficult to capture in standard essay formats.

For maximum usefulness, however, the writing must indeed be allowed to be informal. Students in the survey objected to conditions which limited creativ-

ity, even while acknowledging that the writing needed to be monitored.

Solution: The following practices should be avoided: (1) close grading of informal writing assignments. If an instructor grades too closely, what is likely being expected is not "informal" writing at all, but miniature essays in the form of journal entries. In a shop-talk lunch, an instructor of an interdisciplinary "Media and Reality" course acknowledged that he expected his students to produce polished arguments in their journal entries -- and that he was considering giving up "journals" because the students complained too much. (2) restrictions on journal entry length. Instructors who limit journal entries to a single page signal that entries are not an opportunity but a chore. (3) not allowing variety in forms of response. Students learn in a variety of ways, including the visual. Evaluation forms praised instructors who encouraged poetry, dramatic dialogues, personal letters, and map-making.

Problem #2: Lack of motivation.

The flip side of problem #1 is insufficient direction. As one American history student put it, "I felt as though I had little to NO direction given for my informal writing. I do not expect someone to tell me about what or how to write, but I do want a minimum of guidance."

What the narratives of instructors across the curriculum show -- especially those new to WAC -- is that of the four required "W" course elements, "informal writing" causes the most frustration, mainly because instructors are not used to employing it. The result can be a journal requirement that hangs in the ozone; if an instructor doesn't know how a journal works, it's unlikely that

her students will either.

Solution: Information and orientation for both instructor and students; clear definition of task; enticing model journal entries. The following practices also increase student motivation:

"Encourage people," writes an economics student, "make them want to write." This individual indicates one potential value of journal writing by suggesting that a course should "emphasize that all people may have different opinions." Informal writing gives students the opportunity to state their opinions and if informal writing is then shared aloud in class, illustrating the range of possible response to an issue or idea, students are likely to be further motivated to take their opinion-forming -- and thus journal writing -- seriously.

More directly important to strong motivation is the dyadic relationship between instructor and individual student. The courses whose informal writing components were most highly praised were those whose instructors actively participated in the students' growth, usually by way of comments in the journal margins. Students who know that they have a live, interested audience take their writing more seriously than do those whose instructors pick up journals infrequently and en masse, paving the way for an orgy of painful journal reading to follow an orgy of painful last-minute journal writing.

The best strategy we have seen is for the instructor to pick up a few journals at random each class meeting. Reading a few journals at a time is not onerous: on the contrary, it provides a stimulating way of monitoring a

class's progress and entering into several ongoing, productive, well-motivated conversations at the same time.

Problem #3: Too much informal writing required.

When a student declares, "Journals are tedious and annoying," as did this one in "African History, 1800 -- Present," one wonders what the two adjectives really mean; neither should attach to informal writing properly used. In this particular case, the course instructor had taken journals too far, assigning two long entries per day and eventually cutting planned papers when the students complained about the amount of writing. This instructor had been oversold on the value of informal writing as an aid to learning course material.

Solution: When the above course was revised, the instructor heeded an evaluation comment from another student: "We should have been required to write fewer entries in the hopes that what we did write would be better." With informal writing as with other course elements, balance and the opportunity to produce quality work are crucial.

Problem #4: The informal writing is not well integrated into the course.

An American literature student writes, "Journals are simply a higher form of busy work and should be eliminated from courses which treat them as nothing more than that."

Solution: The comment signals an important principle: informal writing works

best if the instructor uses it to actively serve the course's objectives. Thus:

If a course's main purpose is to facilitate better critical thinking, then journal entry assignments should challenge and stimulate thinking about work in progress. Rather than simply having students record what's on their mind -- course-related or not -- instructors can pose direct, probing questions and respond enthusiastically with comments and further questions in the margins.

If stimulating class discussion is a goal, having students write informally on planned discussion topics (usually after assigned reading) can provide excellent entry points, especially when classes begin with students reading responses aloud; free-writes at the beginning of class can be used to the same effect. One advantage of an instructor's regular reading of journals -- even if only a few a day -- is that she can stir just-written student comments into the mix as well, directly involving even more students. When students see their ideas being taken seriously and used to further the common understanding, they take their thinking more seriously and push for insight which can be used to good effect in subsequent class discussion.

If excellent papers are a goal, informal writing can be harnessed for the all-important work of invention. "W" instructors make breakthroughs when they find ways of using journals to help students write toward formal assignments. An American history student, for example, writes, "I thought writing entries on papers in progress was an original idea. It helped me sort through topics." Not only does the quality of thinking in the final draft thereby improve, but,

if the instructor solicits it through appropriate informal writing assignments, voice -- or any other primary trait -- can as well.

After her first semester's "W" course, an economics professor wrote, "I had a hard time figuring out how to integrate informal writing into our paper writing." In her second semester, she received outstanding evaluations after she first aligned journal entries with class discussions and then aligned both with formal paper assignments, thereby interlinking all major course elements in a way that students found highly useful.

III. The Writing Text

Problem #1: The text is inappropriate for the course.

A student in a senior-level interdisciplinary course writes, "I did not even buy the writing text. Everything contained in it was (or should have been) covered in freshman English."

Solution: The choice of an appropriate text -- one which offers new information and supports a high level of challenge -- is integral to (1) the writing course's integrity and (2) the successful balancing of base course and writing component. We have found useful the two series' of discipline-specific writing guides published by HarperCollins (e.g., A Short Guide to Writing About History) and Heath (e.g., Writer's Guide: Political Science); such texts -- or an area-specific text like Robert Day's How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper -- help eliminate student objection that a base course is trying to act like an English course.

An economics professor, unable to find a book on writing for economics and faced with the choice between the English handbook she had previously used and a Heath writing text for sociology whose emphases she felt were close to hers, chose the sociology text and found that it overcame her student's anti-English-class biases. An instructor must, of course, pick a text whose level as well as subject matter are is appropriate, as suggested by the student in a general chemistry course who commented, "the text [a specialized manual for professional chemists] was far too technical for this type of class. I would recommend something far less convoluted with terms and criticism."

We have had success with a manual designed specifically for our "W" courses. Covering such topics as the writing process, peer-editing, revising, and professional documentation at an advanced level, it provides generic support for any "W" course and has the added advantage of being a college publication rather than a product of the English department: it features voices from across the faculty providing straight, practical, professional-discipline-related talk from writers to writers. The manual is pitched directly to the students of our institution and is revised annually based on feedback from both students and "W" course instructors.

Problem #2: The text is not well integrated into the course:

As with informal writing, a writing text supports a "W" course best and is most highly regarded by students when the instructor integrates it into the day-to-day experience of the course (an amusing exception to this principle is registered by another student in the general chemistry course mentioned two

paragraphs above; the student writes, "The writing text was not well integrated into the course. Thank God it wasn't!"). A classical mythology student writes, "if the writing text is supposed to be an integral part of the course then I feel it could be used more to make the course better. Something more than just saying 'buy the book' should be done."

Solution: The most successful "W" courses use the writing text actively to define and provide back-up for the tasks in the writing process. In these courses, reading in the text is assigned and at least some discussion of relevant text material takes place in the classroom. Ideally, the appropriateness of the book's foci and the quality of its examples enable it to play the important role of repository of assignment-specific standards.

IV. Peer editing

Problem #1: Student editors do not provide quality feedback

This complaint, frustrating to both student and instructor, can mask several causes. Most important of these: (1) students are insufficiently motivated to perform what can be a labor-intensive activity; (2) they have been inadequately trained, (3) the system is being insufficiently monitored.

Solution: If (1) is the case, the instructor himself is probably too tentative in his commitment to peer editing; this attitude inevitably carries over to students. What is needed is the delivery of more information to the instructor to help remedy the fear at the root of the tentativeness -- fear of failure. Especially helpful is having the new instructor discuss strategy with base

course instructors for whom peer editing has succeeded. If a mentoring relationship can be set up, so much the better.

Instructor tentativeness often manifests itself in weak organization of the peer-editing component: in lack of cohesive overall plan, for example, or insufficient time allowed to provide quality feedback. Regarding the first, the instructor must be sure to match pedagogy with objectives. If, for example, the goal is substantial and detailed written improvement between drafts, then written feedback, ideally done outside of class, should be the strategy of choice. Instructors new to peer-editing may express their hesitancy by deciding to rely solely on class-based oral feedback which, besides not being as detailed, features other problems. For instance, a psychology student writes,

> I don't think peer editing should be done through reading papers out loud. I don't believe as thorough a job can be done & it can be embarrassing, tense, or stressful for a student who'd prefer not to share their paper.

Assuming that an atmosphere is created which does eliminate the stress of reading papers aloud, the instructor seeking detailed draft improvement should consider making the oral component part of a larger sequence composed of other clearly scheduled and well-defined tasks as well -- e.g., at-home editing using an edit guide, modeling of group discussion, the discussion itself, student response to the peer editing, class evaluation/discussion of the process -- tasks which are spaced appropriately to allow for excellent performance.

A second reason (2) for low-quality feedback is inadequate training: students may simply not know how to peer-edit well. A key peer-editing principle is that modeling is crucial, both for written comments and for productive group discussion. Such modeling can take several forms: hands-on demonstration by the instructor, discussion of examples of excellent student editing, participation in the first round of editing by the instructor. A strategy that we have found highly effective is the "fishbowl discussion," in which a student group conducts a pre-arranged sample discussion in front of the rest of the class. This activity, followed by class discussion of their performance, enables students to see what works and what does not both in group dynamics and in the written commentaries which have provided the text for the group's discussion. Base course instructors may resist using class time for such training, but it is worth stressing that this small up-front investment reaps a large dividend.

Student editors need particularly to learn how to chart an effective course between the Scylla and Charybdis of peer-editing, namely, being too negative or too positive. A "Humanistic Ecology" student writes, "some people got carried away with the critical thinking aspect and forgot to give positive reinforcement"; another student in the same class writes, "I always felt like people weren't critical enough." As in most things, balance is best, and again we look to the training function, whether this take the form of explicit written instructions, instructor rap, or -- preferably -- discussion of effective peer-editing samples. Peer-editing is a complicated task initially, but it is a task whose moves can be readily learned. And for peer-editing to work, they must be learned.

Regarding reason (3), a student in a "History of Islam" course advises her instructor via the evaluation, "Be more controlled over the peer-editing aspect of the course: I was not able to benefit from it b/c my peer editors either didn't return my work or gave me comments that were too skimpy." Lack of instructor monitoring can subvert the entire process. A workable strategy: students grade their editors on the basis of both quantity and quality of comments and submit grades and peer-edited drafts along with the revision. The instructor can quickly record the grades and skim the revisions. A pre-set editing word minimum (for example at least two hundred and fifty words of commentary in margins and final note) can figure in the assigning of a course participation grade.

Problem #2: The instructor is insufficiently involved in the peer evaluation process

A troubling perception that often appears in "W" course evaluations is that the peer editing apparatus exists apart from the instructor's own evaluation system.

A psychology student writes, "we all know that what the 'peers' think about a paper doesn't mean diddledy doo. It's the professor that is passing out the A's." A history student adds, "if your editors suggest something different from what the instructor wants, you're screwed." An economics student observes, "if the professor had been my peer editor, the writing component would have been great."

If the professor had been the peer editor, important gains of the system would have been lost. The student editors would have been deprived of responsibility and consequently would not have improved as much as self editors. Meanwhile the professor would have been deprived of one of the incentives of teaching a "W" course -- namely, being able to improve student writing without investing enormous quantities of extra time.

This is not to say that the professor has no direct role in the peer evaluation process. For one thing, peer editing should reflect the instructor's own final evaluation process. Granted, peer response to a paper-in-progress will differ in substance and kind from an instructor's comments on a final draft. But both should be based on the same criteria and goals. Even if the instructor is not physically present in a peer group discussion, the student discussants should know what she would say if she were there. The instructor and students should have discussed criteria and ideally co-authored a written edit guide which articulates them -- an edit guide which concretely represents the agreement that both instructor and peer editors will employ its standards in responding to drafts.

Moreover, the instructor can perform a useful summing-up role at the end of every draft sequence that culminates in a paper. A "Japanese Film" student suggests that "peer editing should be seen by the professor . . . so the professor knows how it was used in the paper." And indeed, an optimal situation occurs when the instructor's final written comment discusses the student paper in light of what the peer editors have had to say on the previous drafts. Here the instructor functions like a respondent at a panel of conference papers, validating the peer commentary in using it constructively.

Problems that arise with instructor involvement in the peer editing process share this common denominator with the other problems discussed above: all point to a need for balance. This balance involves not only the standard pairs involved in any writing course -- process and product, instructor and student, individual student and group -- but some unique to the "W" course as well. Chief among these are the base course and the "W" component themselves, with the not-necessarily-congruent learning styles, pedagogical techniques, classroom dynamics, and apparatus which each entails.

The good news is that the instructor who succeeds -- and success is possible with proper training and the right support -- is one who by definition has established such balance at the core of her WAC pedagogy and thereby mastered some of the important "secrets" we know about effective teaching -- secrets revealed in texts like Peter Elbow's Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process and George Hillocks' Research in Written Composition. Elbow tells us that the successful teacher is one who acknowledges and balances the conflicting demands that she be both an active, nurturing participant in the process and a detached arbiter. Hillocks demonstrates empirically the superiority of the so-called "environmental method" of teaching, which mediates between the traditional presentational style of teaching and the student-oriented process method, drawing synthetically on all elements in the pedagogical "environment" -- old theory/new theory, full class/peer groups . . . and even disciplinary knowledge/writing pedagogy. The "W" instructor who learns through balance and integration to cope with the problems discussed above has dealt with the issues raised by Elbow and Hillocks and become a better teacher in the process -- meaning a pay-off for her, for her students, and for the institution.

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